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9 February 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Briefing of Defense Subcommittee of House Appropriations,
8 February 1965

1. This briefing dealt entirely with the situation in Vietnam.
After the formal presentation, the questions involved:

- a. The reasons for lack of progress in South Vietnam.
- b. The lack of warning in the case of the Pleiku attack.
- c. The background and probable North Vietnam and ChiCom reaction to our retaliatory air strike.
- d. The estimate of the situation in South Vietnam.
- e. The result if we pulled out of South Vietnam.
- f. The chances of and prerequisites for a negotiated settlement.
- g. The reasons for some previous optimistic statements in prior briefings.

2. The Director's responses generally were:

- a. The difficulty in South Vietnam to get the leaders to lay aside their differences and unite in their common anti-Communist interest so that there would be continuity in government and the people could have confidence in it.

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b. The probability that the strike north would give the North Vietnamese some reason to pause although it is possible they might strike back and the Viet Cong may do something dramatic.

c. The estimate on the whole that there were more reasons to be pessimistic than optimistic in considering the future in South Vietnam but that the situation was not hopeless and that this estimate had been a constant intelligence position in prior briefings.

d. In connection with the pull out, he dwelt on the domino theory, saying he felt it was an unfortunate phrase and misrepresented the situation; on the lack of warning at Pleiku, he pointed out the lack of effectiveness of the South Vietnamese intelligence service and the lack of information from the natives due to the terrorism of the Viet Cong; on negotiated settlement, he pointed out the prior need for a position of strength.

3. A summary of questions and answers is attached. These are for the most part condensed and not exact quotations. The full text is available if desired.

LAWRENCE R. HOUSTON
General Counsel

Attachment

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GIST OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE OF HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS

Briefing - 8 February 1965

Vietnam

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Director: Unless political opportunists and rivals unite, they will deliver themselves into the hands of Communists.

Chairman: Your final remarks would indicate situation in Vietnam looks hopeless.

Director: Not hopeless. Far more reasons to be pessimistic than optimistic. I still hope parties of interest will set aside parochial objectives and unite behind government of national interests.

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Chairman: Rank and file people must see personal stake and unite behind government, or operations will fail.

Director: Yes. Leaders have to unite. People are quite apathetic about form of government, but there is a thin layer who are highly charged politically and have become involved.

Chairman: Nobody in their right mind would think you could convert this jungle into American-type democracy within the next few years.

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Chairman: What will bring government together and unite people behind it?

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Director: Realization that it is more important to unite against than struggle for own personal gain. Contending parties share anti-Communist positions. Disagreement arises over political influence.

Chairman: Is it true that a thin layer of Catholics are trying to run the country?

Director: They have strong voice because, to a large extent, they are educated, which makes them more capable. French colonialism is the result of Catholic movement, not vice versa.

Page 29 Chairman: You previously said, unless such and such happens, this thing could not be worked out.

Page 30 Director: Only certainty is that they must have stable and effective government with backing of people if Viet Cong are to be defeated.

Chairman: The South Vietnam government is going in opposite direction from what you say is required for success.

Director: All indicators and events since Ambassador Taylor's return in early December would support your statement.

Chairman: Has this view been made available to other people in the U. S. Government?

Director: Yes.

Chairman: Will our recent action in North Vietnam reduce or intensify Viet Cong action? Why did we do it?

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Director: Difficult to answer. This attack would give North Vietnam some reason to pause. If we continue, they will stop to consider placing the very fabric of their society on the block. This will hurt Viet Cong because they will have less supply and less direction. I would not be surprised by violent action in South Vietnam during this reappraisal period. The Viet Cong have a "burst capability" to execute dramatic strikes.

Chairman: Such as bombing of Saigon?

Director: I think not because North Vietnam does not have that capability. Might get a few bombs through in IL-28's from Hainan Island.

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Chairman: What's wrong with intelligence in Vietnam, having no information on Viet Cong attack?

Director: That is a military intelligence problem of Vietnamese, but they have not been able to give indicators on these attacks. This is a very definite failure.

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Chairman: What about our own intelligence?

Director: This is the responsibility of military intelligence, who work closely with Vietnamese.

Page 34

Chairman: What do you think of French interpretation that Hanoi caused attacks, hoping for retaliation to use as a lever to get more aid from Russia and/or China.

Director: There is a difference of opinion among my analysts. We pointed out to Dobrynin that the Soviets were mousetrapped in Hanoi by this event.

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Mr. Sikes: What is appeal of Viet Cong or secret strength of North Vietnam to make tremendous progress despite everything we have done?

Director: Viet Cong are dedicated. It takes a vastly numerically superior force to combat guerrillas. This was true 125 years ago in Western U. S.

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Mr. Sikes: Is there no similar dedication on part of Vietnamese?

Director: There is. The month of January was the month of most successful military operations. The Communists are highly motivated, and the people appear to be disinterested out of apathy, fear, war weariness. One great problem is unwillingness of people to cooperate, thus there was no Paul Revere to warn of Pleiku, although undoubtedly, people in nearby villages knew the Viet Cong were assembling these mortars.

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Mr. Sikes: Why didn't we strike back harder?

Director: Bad weather. Four attacks were authorized, but only Dong Hoi was even partially open.

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Mr. Sikes: Why didn't you postpone operation?

Director: We wanted quick reprisal.

Mr. Sikes: Is weather only reason why South Vietnamese did not attack?

Director: Yes. They went the next day, and U. S. planes only provided cover against possible MIG intervention.

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Mr. Sikes: Is Khanh anti-U.S. ?

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Director: No. He doesn't see eye-to-eye with Ambassador Taylor, but this was true long before Taylor went there. Khanh is very ambitious.

Taylor was not there when Khanh got rid of Hoang government, and Taylor was stern with him and temporarily brought about Hoang re-establishment. McGeorge Bundy's first meeting with Khanh was very formal and strained, but his second meeting about our plans for the Dong Hoi strike was very satisfactory.

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Mr. Sikes: Are prospects now better for a stable government?

Director: There have been no such prospects since the fall of Diem. Our only hope is that the events of the last 48 hours will inspire them to unite.

Mr. Sikes: What would be the result if U.S. pulled out or negotiated settlement?

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Director: If we pulled out, it would be very, very serious. It would also measure our determination in other parts of the world. The success of negotiations requires a position of strength.

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Mr. Sikes: Do the strikes of the last few days put us in a position of strength?

Director: No. They would have to be sustained strikes so North Vietnamese could measure danger of sacrificing the fabric of their society.

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Mr. Sikes: What do you think about regaining lost property in South Vietnam?

Director: Both strikes and ground gains would be useful. Currently, the strikes hurt them.

Page 43 Mr. Sikes: You don't anticipate wide-spread military reaction by North Vietnam or Red Chinese then as a result of strikes?

Director: Probably not as long as ChiComs not threatened nor industrial part of North Vietnam. There is a possibility, however, and we have to be prepared.

Mr. Smith: ChiComs not imperiled as long as they realize this is retaliation for aggressive sabotage efforts. This would not be true if we started to systematically destroy North Vietnam as a country. These are judgments.

Page 45 Mr. Whitten: We don't know who's with us or against us in South Vietnam. How do North Viet Cong differ in their theories of government from Khanh or "Big" Minh or others working for us there? How do you differentiate them from Communists, and what do you mean by Communists?

Director: Ho Chi Minh is a trained, dedicated Communist; and North Vietnam is an absolute authoritarian Communist dictator state.

Page 48 Mr. Whitten: I have yet to hear anybody who had complete confidence in any Vietnamese. Can you name one person you have full confidence in that they are on our side?

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Director: It's a big order to say you have full confidence in any foreign leader, that he would support American position as contrasted with what he feels necessary for his own country.

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I have no reason to doubt their responsibility with U.S. I didn't doubt Diem, or Duang, I didn't and don't doubt "Big" Minh.

I'm critical of Khanh but don't doubt him or Xuam Oanh.

Page 50

Mr. Whitten: How can you identify the good guys from the bad?

Mr. Smith: The strongest thing in our favor is that the South Vietnamese want to be left alone. They feel we are helpful to them and look upon us as protectors from terror, sabotage, attack, and coercion.

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Mr. Whitten: Is there anything to indicate that the overthrow of governments in Vietnam is for purpose of getting financial aid from us? Maybe the recent strikes against us were South Vietnamese inspired for that very purpose.

Page 54

Director: Just the opposite. There has been great doubt whether we were going to support the various new governments.

Page 55

Mr. Andrews: Any real late information on ChiComs moving troops south?

Director: No reinforcements or movement of new units in recent months.

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Page 59 Mr. Andrews: You said several years ago that only 38 per cent of people supported Diem.

Director: We did not think Diem had wide popular support. He had control.

Mr. Andrews: Is the present government military?

Director: It's amorphous now. Hopefully it will evolve a civilian head of state and a prime minister, either civilian or military, and a council, partly civilian and military.

Page 60 Mr. Andrews: You said negotiation is inevitable to bring about stability.

Page 61 Director: That is so. The integrity of South Vietnam and Laos must be recognized.

Mr. Andrews: How long before conditions ripe for agreement?

Director: I don't know--could be years.

Mr. Minshall: How soon or long could it be?

Page 62 Director: I couldn't make a guess at all. Our own courses of action are important, and I don't know what they will be. We have estimated the probable reaction of ChiComs and North Vietnamese, but there are other possible courses.

Page 76 Mr. Minshall: I'm disturbed that our intelligence community has been so consistently wrong in the six years I've been here. Only a year ago, Mr. McNamara said things were looking up. He said General Khanh was a bright spot on our side.

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Director: I can't comment on what General Taylor or Mr. McNamara said about Vietnam. I have not seen their testimony. I have reviewed my own testimony. A year ago, it was pessimistic as it is today. For the last two years, every intelligence estimate warned of deterioration in South Vietnam.

Mr. Minshall: Mr. McNamara never got the word then.

Director: You will have Mr. McNamara up here. You can ask him.

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Mr. Minshall: How can Viet Cong penetrate our perimeters of defense so easily?

Director: This is out of my province. General Goodpaster is in a better position to explain the difficulties of policing an area around an airfield. It's disturbing because it can recur.

Mr. Minshall: Somebody is not doing their job.

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Director: You'd think border scouts could sweep an area of a couple miles.

Mr. Minshall: Why don't they clear out the underbrush? Do we have pictures of damage at places we bombed?

Director: We have. They are not back yet, but they show ten buildings destroyed at Dong Hoi and two heavily damaged, etc.

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Mr. Minshall: There were inferences at press conferences that South Vietnamese are not anxious to fight and aborted their flights for that reason. I want that specific.

Director: That is not true. They went today. You'll have to respect that Mr. McNamara had to be careful about talking about other targets.

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Mr. Mahon: Somebody would be on the floor making a speech as they did last year.

Director: Why alert the enemy?

Mr. Minshall: Why was Taylor sent to South Vietnam if he doesn't get along with Khanh?

Director: The difficulty in their relationship developed later. Taylor is very, very able and over there at great personal sacrifice.

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Mr. Minshall: Last year Mr. McNamara said we'd be in trouble if something happened to Khanh.

Director: I think he is right.

Mr. Minshall: What would happen if South Vietnam fell?

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Director: Laos would go with Souphanouvong taking over. There would be intensified guerrilla activity in Thailand. We had detected that about 90 days ago. They would jump over Malaysia and would finish communizing Indonesia, and Malaysia would be flanked and collapse. This would mean a monolithic structure down to the doorsteps of Australia. The consequence would be severe pressure on Formosa, Philippines, and acceleration of left wing in Japan. It's a little hard to tell about Burma.

I separate India and Pakistan from the domino theory.

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Mr. Smith: The sponge would also be thrown in on Cambodia.

Mr. Minshall: What about Korea?

Director: Hard to say. We'd maintain our military presence there, but it will become more difficult.

Director: I don't like to use the domino terminology--dominoes fall all together. We are talking about this happening over three, four, or five years.

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Mr. Minshall: We'd be back to Hawaii.

Director: No. I would not think that within that time span, the Philippines, Japan, or Formosa would succumb.

Mr. Minshall: What course can we take to maintain security in Southeast Asia if South Vietnam falls?

Director: Don't let South Vietnam fall. This is one we ought to win.

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Mr. Minshall: Any doubt that we can't win?

Director: No.

Mr. Mahon: Did you say Philippines ultimately would fall?

Director: Pressures of Communism will build up irresistibly.

Mr. Mahon: Domino theory is imprecise. It's 16 years since ChiComs came to power.

Director: Of course, that's why I demurred on using that expression. The reason these countries have not fallen is largely because of action we have taken. Thailand is good example.

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Larry Houston
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Mr. McCone says let's don't.



W. Elder

A handwritten signature, likely of W. Elder, written in dark ink.

11 Feb 65

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